Griselda Gambaro's Theatre of the Absurd

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Griselda Gámbaro belongs to the most recent generation of Argentine playwrights. She began her dramatic career in 1963 with a two-act play, *Las paredes,* for which she was awarded the first prize of the Asociación Santafecina de Teatros Independientes. The following year she received the Premio Emecé for *El desatino,* a book of short stories and novellas. One of the novellas lends the collection its title and forms the basis for her second play, also titled *El desatino.* It was recognized as the best national drama of 1965 by the review *Teatro XX,* and was staged and published the same year by the Centro de Experimentación Audiovisual del Instituto Torcuato di Tella in Buenos Aires. Since her initial success, Griselda Gámbaro has written three more plays: *Viejo matrimonio* (1965), *Los siameses* (1967) and *El campo* (1967). *Los siameses* and *El campo* have been staged with great success by the Instituto Torcuato di Tella and received with acclaim by the critics.

Of the five dramas written to date, *El desatino, Los siameses* and *El campo* are the author's most significant works.[1] They constitute prime examples of the present trend toward total theatre in Latin American drama, and attest to the influence of Antonin Artaud whose theoretical writings and staging experiments prepared the way for the French Theatre of the Absurd.

Artaud calls for a theatre that is non-representational and non-literary, and that employs "all the means of expression utilizable on stage."[2] The three themes which he emphasizes again and again in his theoretical works are "(1) a plea for a new language of the theatre; (2) catharsis, incorporating the idea of cruelty and the double; and (3) the almost mythical sense of the vocation which the *metteur en scène* ought to possess."[3] Griselda Gámbaro fulfills these basic requisites of the theatre as envisioned by Artaud by

using non-rhetorical language integrated with gestures and all kinds of sound, by incorporating psychological cruelty and physical violence, and by assigning primary importance to the *mise-en-scène.* Furthermore, Gámbaro's dramas have many other elements in common with the Theatre of the Absurd, such as the division of the plays into two acts, a simple plan, characters lacking in individuality, sparse action subordinated to the spirit of the play, and a sense of metaphysical anguish at the absurdity of the human condition.[4] Her dramas are characterized by desolation, defeat and disintegration, thus conveying a sense of man's isolation in a hostile world and of the irremediable nature of the human condition. The overall mood is one of negation and futility; the vision of man is grim and absolute.

El desatino is reminiscent of Arthur Adamov's dramatic style in that it develops in a highly theatrical way a Kafkaesque theme tinged with social overtones. It has a nightmarish quality; everything that happens is beyond rational motivation. At times the characters arouse laughter; the general tone, however, is somber from the initial crisis and lasts throughout the inexorable unwinding of the situation. The main character Alfonso is confronted one morning with a bizarre event: a bulky iron object is attached to one of his feet. Completely immobilized by it, Alfonso is unable to free himself from it. As the play progresses he suffers increasingly from his immobility and the pain and stench of his decaying foot. Yet his mother and his friend Luis do not take any notice of his condition. A physically aggressive type, Luis soon becomes the mother's lover and terrorizes Alfonso by playing dangerous games with him. The latter, however, remains totally submissive to both his mother and his friend.

Other important figures in the play are an absent character and an outsider. The person who never appears on stage is Alfonso's wife Lily. She is constantly being alluded to by the mother and Luis but is seen only by Alfonso in a dream sequence as a larger-than-life female, a mixture of whore and little girl. The stage directions describe her as an exaggerated version of a movie sex symbol like Anita Ekberg in *La dolce vita.* Clearly, Lily is not Alfonso's real wife but an almost childish sexual obsession. In contrast, the outsider is a very real person. His presence gives a definite social dimension to the play. He is a road construction worker who leaves his job in order to help Alfonso. The latter, in turn, only reprimands him for his efforts and treats him condescendingly.

At the end of the play Alfonso is so debilitated by the unnatural burden that he has lost his articulate speech, stuttering horribly whenever he attempts to say a word. At the same time it is announced that he has become a father. While the mother, Luis and some neighbors celebrate this event, the worker, using a large file, finally succeeds in removing Alfonso's fetter. However, the release from it comes too late for Alfonso. He is no longer capable of utilizing his freedom. Utterly exhausted he falls back on his bed.

The other characters gather around him and treat him as if he were the recently born baby. Alfonso has indeed fathered a child, his own infantile self.

Alfonso's regression at the hands of his mother and friend is the persistent and crushing theme of the play. The outsider, the simple young worker, is the only character who sees something wrong in Alfonso's condition and who offers his friendship and help. There is however no final solution for Alfonso's problem; his degeneration cannot be averted. His arrogance and unwillingness to cooperate with the youth eventually bring him to a state of utter exhaustion. When the fettering object is finally removed, Alfonso remains as helpless as before.

El desatino contains elements that are obviously symbolic. Lily (Lillith) represents sexual obsession; Viola, the mother, appropriately violates her son's masculinity. The strong youth stands for the working class, Luis for the selfish middle class. These symbols suggest an allegory about contemporary Argentine or Latin American society in which the middle class male (Alfonso) is fettered by his own self-indulgent sexual fantasies, by a matriarchally dominated family, and by a calloused and shallow society. The efforts of the working class, although well-meant, are arrogantly scorned by and ultimately wasted on the degenerate middle class.

Griselda Gámbaro presents her Kafkaesque tale in a very theatrical manner. By stressing physical language as advocated by Artaud, she addresses the play to the senses, not to the intellect.[5] The iron fetter on Alfonso's foot as well as various other objects are used to emphasize his helplessness: he knocks out of his reach a ringing alarm clock; chamber pots multiply in successive scenes under his bed; the worker uses a little vegetable cart to move Alfonso about on the stage, etc. Other dramatic techniques in accordance with Artaud's theories involve the use of an oversize mannequin to represent Lily, and many sound effects, such as the annoying grating noise of the filing in the last scene while the mother is trying to entertain her guests.[6]

Cruelty is perhaps the most notable Artaudian element in the play.[7] There are moments of outright sadism when Luis, pretending to be playing, burns Alfonso's eyelashes with a cigarette and almost strangles him with a shawl. The incidents of physical violence and moral cruelty are very numerous. Combined, they convey a sense of despair which turns into a kind of metaphysical experience for the viewer.

Los siameses, involving similar dramatic techniques as *El desatino,* explores the dualism of good and evil in a modern Cain and Abel version. The brothers Lorenzo and Ignacio are complementary natures. Their relationship is one of mutual interdependence, as the title symbolically implies. They are simultaneously drawn to each other and at war with each other, and call to mind the various pairs who are similarly linked in the French

Theatre of the Absurd.[8] Lorenzo is domineering and astute whereas Ignacio is submissive and ingenious. The latter, however, is the more favored of the two. He is the provider, he owns the house they live in, he is handsome and successful with girls. Lorenzo, in contrast, does not work, owns no possessions, has a twisted expression on his face, and is impotent. He is envious of his brother and is determined to bring about his downfall.

Incorporated into *Los siameses* are theartical devices of all sorts; objects, motions, grimaces, silences, noises, shouts, crosstalk, disguises, violent physical actions and grotesque images combine in an unusually concrete articulation on stage. The play begins with a violent incident. As the curtain rises on the bedroom shared by the brothers, Lorenzo dashes into the room as if pursued by someone and locks himself in. He is exhausted but obviously pleased with himself, as it turns out, not because he got away but because Ignacio has fallen behind. When the latter reaches the door and begs to be let in, Lorenzo maliciously refuses his request. The mysterious pursuer catches up with Ignacio and beats him mercilessly until he collapses. To console his injured brother Lorenzo offers to sleep near the door, while Ignacio has to pass the night outside in a puddle of blood.

In the next scene two policemen, El Sonriente and El Gangoso, visit the brothers for no apparent reason. They seem at first to be the absurd and harmless beings their names suggest. But when Lorenzo brings a series of accusations against his brother and starts a fight with him, the policemen join Lorenzo attacking Ignacio ferociously. We discover suddenly that the seemingly innocuous nature of the policemen is only a mask, and sense that this scene has something to say to us about the secret dread and anxieties we experience living in a world of terrorism.

Lorenzo devotes himself fully to plotting his brother's downfall in the first three scenes of Act II. He sews some false banknotes into the lining of Ignacio's suitcase and thus succeeds in proving to the police that his brother is a bank robber.

When the next scene opens Ignacio is in jail. Lorenzo, who is anxiously awaiting news of his brother's death, appears successively in three disguises in the vicinity of the prison. In his masquerade as a Jew, a blind man, and a junk dealer he tries to learn something about his brother from an old man whom he finds sitting on a bench not far from the prison. But the latter has only negative answers, he never sees anybody, and is mostly concerned about obtaining a stick to unplug a conduit. At the same time Ignacio's voice is heard in the distance calling Lorenzo who is careful to remain unidentified. In his disguises Lorenzo assumes the role of the victim. But at first it is a false mask, for as a Jew he turns his guilt into an accusation against the old man, as a blind man he beats the old man with his cane, and as a junk dealer who vaguely resembles a concentration camp prisoner he is not too convincing due to his "aspecto mucho más saludable" (p. 76). How-

ever, by the end of the play it is made clear that Lorenzo is not only a victimizer but also a victim, perhaps of himself and also of circumstances beyond his control.

When he last appears in disguise Lorenzo, along with the old man, a second old man and a boy, is rounded up by the police to help with Ignacio's burial. In a grotesque, rude manner they force Ignacio's body into Lorenzo's small junk cart and merrily carry him off to an open field. To each of the old men this event has a personal advantage. The first one is overjoyed at seeing a cow; the second one is happy because he hopes to get some exercise by helping to dig the grave. However, ultimately both go home disappointed, the former because he did not touch the cow, and the latter because Lorenzo would not let him have the spade. They leave the scene with their desire unfulfilled.

In contrast to the pitiful and despicably selfish old men there is the boy who expresses concern for the dead man. But Lorenzo, resenting his interest in Ignacio, attacks him cruelly. As in *El desatino,* the youth is the only character who has redeeming human qualities. The old people are hardened toward life, showing concern only for themselves and their affairs.

After the incident with the boy when Lorenzo is left alone at the graveside, his ambiguous role of being both the victimizer and the victim has not been resolved. He accuses his brother of having died only "para jorobarme" (p. 86), and experiences no joy on realizing that all of Ignacio's possessions now belong to him. He even tries out his brother's smile as he repeats to himself: "Me voy. Me voy, ahora sí me voy" (p. 86). However, the smile turns into a horrible grimace and he remains motionless, gradually assuming a position similar to that of Ignacio's body in the little cart. This ending is somewhat reminiscent of the last moment in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* where the characters do not move after Estragon has uttered his famous "allons y." As they are doomed to keep waiting for Godot, so Lorenzo is condemned to remain inactive, in a state that resembles death more than life. The stigma of Cain destines Lorenzo to total isolation.

Los siameses show two brothers in a self-contained world of damnation. The stronger one of the two destroys his weaker brother but gains nothing. This conclusion suggests that the play is about an essential aspect of the human condition, that we never attain that ultimate satisfaction we strive for. In the end "we are disappointed at the nullity of what we are pleased to call attainment" and die on the way to the fulfillment of our desire.[9]

El campo concerns itself primarily with a political theme: it is essentially an allegory about political dictatorship and its relationship to art and individual freedom. Throughout the play the brutalities of Nazi concentration camps are evoked in the dialogue and the costumes as well as in the events taking place off-stage. This frame of reference serves to relate

the immediate drama presented on the stage to the wider context of political situations of an international scope.

At the beginning of Act I Martín has just been hired as an administrator by an establishment that is not identified in the play. He is shown into a clean modern office, but there is something uncanny going on outside. Mixed with children's voices he hears the barking of ferocious dogs and shouts of military orders. Martín is unable to see anything through the window and is startled when his new boss (symbolically named Franco) enters wearing a Nazi uniform. Although Franco maintains about him an air of bonhomie, Martín clearly finds himself in a hostile environment. His movements are restricted. When he attempts to take a walk after dinner, Franco holds him back, promising to send for a young woman to entertain him.

Emma, violently pushed onto the stage, is an appalling sight. She is not only barefoot and poorly dressed, but her head is shaved and a large wound is festering on her right hand. Her bearing, however, is that of a self-confident and worldly woman. She introduces herself as a pianist and claims Franco as her friend and guardian. She speaks repeatedly about her artistic accomplishments without ever alluding to her degraded condition. That Emma's situation is unbearable is expressed by the uncontrollable itching of her skin. She scratches herself incessantly, especially when she is in Franco's presence.

In the most grotesque scene of the play Emma is supposed to be giving a concert in honor of Martín. The audience is made up of SS troopers and a group of convicts. While the piano tuner is trying to put the instrument in order, Emma is ferociously scratching herself. Franco solicitously dabs her with a liquid which only increases her itching. The prisoners are very restless. To amuse themselves some ridicule and insult Emma with crude language. One of them takes off his shoes and has a fellow prisoner scratch the soles of his feet. Several times when the situation seems to be getting out of control, the SS troopers quickly restore order. Finally Emma begins to play but to her frustration the piano keys are dead. Franco insists on her playing, and Emma complies by performing a grotesque number in which the convicts participate as a chorus, drowning out her voice completely. Martín is tortured by this scene and cries out in protest. Three of the SS troopers quickly surround him and see to it that he keeps quiet.

In the following scene Martín and Emma are together in his office while outside the dogs are barking and machine guns are fired. Martín is anxious to find out what is happening, but Emma, who seems to be incapable of facing up to the reality of the situation, says it is only a fox hunt. Whereupon Franco, as if to confirm her statement, enters wearing a hunting jacket and carrying a gun. He pretends to have surprised Martín and Emma in a tête-a-tête and forces them to leave. But when they arrive at Martín's house they

are followed by an official whom Emma recognizes as one of Franco's henchmen. With the aid of three male nurses the official carries out what he calls a little formality. Martín in spite of his resistance is overwhelmed and receives an injection. Then he stands, as the curtain falls, a defeated man awaiting the branding iron.

El campo is clearly an allegory about the pressures exerted by political dictatorships on the arts. Emma, the mutilated and degraded artist, is forced by the boss of the establishment to perform a meaningless concert for a boorish audience. The play also communicates the secret dread and anxieties of the individual living in a world of terrorism. Martín crying out in protest against this world which embodies a false bonhomie and bigoted brutality is ultimately its victim.

Griselda Gámbaro in these three plays has developed a personal idiom within the convention of the Theatre of the Absurd. They express, first of all, the preoccupation of our age: the loneliness and isolation of the individual, his difficulties in communicating with others, and the inevitability of his subjection to outside pressures of a social and political nature. A disillusioned scepticism permeates all the plays. The dialogues attest to the limitations of language and to the impossibility of proposing ready-made solutions. Through concrete representation on stage of cruel and violent situations a direct visceral response is evoked from the audience. The intensity of the experience is at times alleviated through the use of black humor. Attention is not drawn to the personality of the characters but rather to the inexorable movement in which they are caught.

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Notes

1. The three dramas are available in paperback editions, the first two illustrated with photographs from the Instituto's productions. *El desatino* (Buenos Aires: Centro de Experimentación Audiovisual del Instituto Torcuato di Tella, 1965); *Los siameses* (Buenos Aires: Insurrexit, 1967); *El campo* (Buenos Aires: Insurrexit, 1967). Quotations are from these editions.
2. Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and its Double* (New York: Grove Press, 1958), p. 39.
3. Eric Sellin, *The Dramatic Concepts of Antonin Artaud* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1968), p. 82.
4. See Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1961).
5. "It [physical language] consists of everything that occupies the stage, everything that can be manifested and expressed materially on a stage and that is addressed first of all to the senses instead of being addressed to the mind as in the language of words." Artaud, p. 38.
6. "In Artaud's ideal theatre 'every spectacle will contain physical and objective elements appreciable to all. Cries, laments, apparitions, surprises . . . masks, mannequins several meters tall. . . .'" Sellin, p. 84.
7. "[People] cannot resist effects of physical surprise, the dynamism of cries and violent movements, visual explosions, the aggregate of tetanizing ('tétanisants') effects called up on cue and used to act in a direct manner on the physical sensitivity of the spectator." Artaud, quoted by Sellin, p. 33.
8. Beckett's Vladimir and Estragon, Pozzo and Lucky in *Waiting for Godot,* and Ham and Clov in *Endgame.* Other theatre pairs are used by Ionesco who prefers the married couple; by Adamov who contrasts the extrovert and the introvert; and by Genet in *The Maids.*
9. Samuel Beckett, *Proust* (New York: Grove Press, n.d.), p. 13.